

Review of *Vulgar Beauty: Acting Chinese in the Global Sensorium* by Mila Zuo (Duke University Press)

by E. Nastacia Schmall | Issue 12.1 (Spring 2023), Book Reviews

ABSTRACT In *Vulgar Beauty: Acting Chinese in the Global Sensorium*, Mila Zuo examines how female Chinese actors perform “vulgar beauty” as a way of “worlding” to create community and belonging through affective shocks, and specifically, to produce feelings of Chineseness. By using the sense of taste, and specifically the flavors bitter, salty, pungent, sweet, and sour, as a framework, Zuo delves into close readings of television and cinematic case studies to look at the different ways vulgar beauty is deployed by these actors. In its analysis, this book offers a reconceptualization of feminine beauty outside of white western dictates and suggests that (vulgar) beauty can be utilized as a potentially disruptive and transformative force, specifically in destabilizing racial and patriarchal power structures.

KEYWORDS film studies, gender, race, vulgar, beauty, Chinese studies

Vulgar Beauty: Acting Chinese in the Global Sensorium. By Mila Zuo. Durham, NC and London, UK: Duke University Press, 2022, 312 pp. (paperback) ISBN 9781478018117. US List \$27.95.

In *Vulgar Beauty: Acting Chinese in the Global Sensorium*, Mila Zuo examines how female Chinese actors perform “vulgar beauty” as a way of “worlding” to create community and belonging through affective shocks, and specifically, to produce feelings of Chineseness. Generally speaking, the Chinese body has often been portrayed as vulgar in western society and media, particularly associated with “amorality, disease, contamination, contagion, and pollution” (17). Chinese women in particular have had to “negotiate their public performativity under a persistent state of gendered, sexualized, and racialized uncertainty and contingency within trans/national contexts” (6) However, focusing on the aspect of “performativity,” Zuo argues that “vulgar beauty” can also be utilized as a mode of self-creation and a way to gain agency and control over narratives surrounding “Chineseness.” Zuo contends that the problem is not with beauty itself, but with the fact that we are unable “to recognize or admit it beyond conventional, categorical, and (white)

western definitions" (25) and that we cannot "apprehend its unseen, phenomenal impact" (36). She argues that we need to continue to critically interrogate the role vulgar beauty plays "in decentering and decolonizing western thought" (23) and recognize how "we are undone and remade by our contact with beauty" (36).

Zuo does this by framing her argument through the modality of taste to examine the question of a body's historically situated edibility. This use of taste departs from a western focus on visibility and instead works within Chinese etymological conceptions of beauty. Zuo uses the five flavors used in Chinese medicine—bitter, salty, pungent, sweet, and sour—to understand beauty "as something of the other that is tasted, consumed, and digested in order to arrive at the extra/sensorial dimensions of aesthetic difference, and to examine the matter of beauty—its vulgarity" (14). Throughout *Vulgar Beauty*, Zuo interweaves western and eastern philosophies to deploy "a new kind of (nonwesternized) deconstructive theory" that "grapples with the textures of linguistic indeterminacy as well as attending to ontoethical concerns within different cosmological orders" (22). She organizes *Vulgar Beauty's* five main chapters by devoting each one to an examination of the embodiment of a particular "flavor" of vulgar beauty through various cinematic case studies, moving through time from reform-era China to modern depictions of multiculturalism.

Chapter 1 offers close readings of Gong Li's performances in the films *Red Sorghum* (1988) and *Hannibal Rising* (2007) to highlight the bitter flavor of sensualized pain in post-Mao China and how this flavor "emerges as a traumatic reckoning with the past" (40). Zuo juxtaposes the seductive beauty of Gong with desexualized, "bland" socialist female star bodies, which work to embody the ideals of socialism despite the "destabilizing affective intensity" of the sociopolitical climate of the 1950s–70s permeated by bitterness (51). Gong embodies this bitterness through her vulgar beauty and draws our attention back to historical trauma.

Chapter 2 turns to Maggie Cheung's performance in the French art film *Irma Vep* (1996) and Joan Chen's performance in the cult US television series *Twin Peaks* (1990–91) as salty depictions of self-preservation and "aesthetic reconsolidations of national identity through multiculturalism" (34). These performances of "salty-cool" are used to negotiate "western infatuation with the Chinese femme's object-surface" and "racist and misogynistic heat" (74). In this film and series, Zuo argues that Chinese female bodies are utilized by white male directors to promote the vision of liberal politics of tolerance that posits that everyone (regardless of race) is equal, while the performances reveal this politics to be "an ambivalent and suspicious mode of passage" (74). Through their vulgar beauty, Zuo argues, Cheung and Chen exude a saltiness that helps to manage the

bitterness of Othering that is ever present in western cultures despite the illusions of liberal politics.

Chapter 3 looks at *The Crow* (1994) and *Lust, Caution* (2007), with the pungent performances of controversial actors Bai Ling and Tang Bei. The chapter shows how the actors' hypersexualized bodies and pungent beauty are charismatic even as they reflect anxieties over cultural decay, "signaling simultaneous desire and anxiety toward tolerance, matrixial desire, and the death drive" (151). The pungency of Bai's body reflects "the reluctance toward American multiculturalism" while the response to Tang's vulgar beauty reveals "a great sense of anxiety about female sexuality" in post-Mao China (139). Zuo argues that, in the end, these women must die for the nation to survive because their pungent beauty "threatens to puncture normativity" (120), and though pungency promotes circulation and the breakdown of accumulation, tolerance can only be born from the Chinese femme's death.

In chapter 4, Zuo moves to the flavor of "sweetness" in heteronormative romance, examining the performances of Vivian Hsu in *The Knot* (2006) and Shu Qi in *If You Are the One* (2008). The chapter suggests that beautiful Chinese women in "soft-power films" are used as a sweetener to reflect the health of the nation and boost its ideological imperatives. Specifically, Zuo argues that the heterosexual relationships between female Taiwanese film stars and mainland men are meant to sweeten the politics of the One China policy. In *The Knot*, however, Hsu's over-the-top performance reflects "the insurgent vulgarity of cuteness" that draws attention to its own artificial sweetness and the surface nature of mainland notions of Chineseness (172). Zuo points out that Shu's performance, on the other hand, questions the One China policy through the deployment of hesitancy. She embodies sweetness and the mainland masculine fantasy through dependency and submissiveness; however, her depressive nature and fixation on the past results in a hesitation that "embodies Taiwanese ambivalence toward Chinese partnership" (176). Through these readings, Zuo argues that these vulgar performances of cuteness work to undermine the ideologies soft-power films are meant to instill.

Finally, chapter 5 investigates sourness and the hegemony disrupting power of laughter in Charlyne Yi's *Paper Heart* (2009) and Ali Wong's *Baby Cobra* (2016) and *Hard Knock Wife* (2018). Zuo shows how Yi's sourness comes from their awkward, genderqueer behavior which "disrupts the image of neoliberal envisionings of beauty and discipline" (210), whereas Wong imbues her performance with sexual vulgarity, which indicates the abject nature of racialized bodies and allows her to sublimate anger and play with power. These two approaches, Zuo argues, "sour the charm of ornamental Asian beauty" (232) and, through laughter, allow for a genuinely collective experience.

In addition to the psychoanalytic, historical, linguistic, and philosophical detours Zuo uses to support her arguments, each chapter in *Vulgar Beauty* also grounds itself in Zuo's own personal experiences as a Chinese-American woman, pointing to the real impact of these impressions and lending her analysis immediacy and relatability. Her metaphoric language, mostly revolving around food, offers the reader not only an intellectual exploration of the power of vulgar beauty to destabilize racial and patriarchal power structures but also a flavorful and aesthetic journey in and of itself.

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Nastacia Schmoll is a PhD candidate in the English Seminar at the University of Zürich, Switzerland. Her past research utilized economic criticism in tandem with gender studies to examine female beauty as a form of capital. Her current research project uses spatial studies alongside ecocritical, postcolonial, and queer studies to explore how depictions of "othering spaces" in science fiction create room to interrogate and problematize people's relationships with the environment, the other, and the self.

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